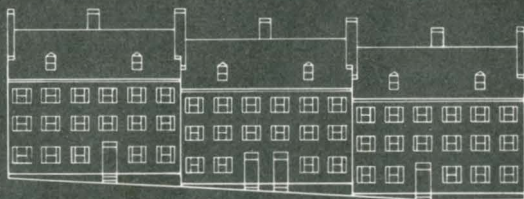


# Making the Lowell Sculptures: The Work of Robert Cumming

An Exhibit by  
The Lowell Historic Preservation Commission  
and The Lowell Office of Cultural Affairs

PATRICK J. MOGAN  
CULTURAL CENTER



40 French Street  
Lowell, Massachusetts 01852

June 30 through September 10, 1990  
Mondays through Fridays 9:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.  
Saturdays 9:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m.

## THE IDEA

"Making The Lowell Sculptures: The Work of Robert Cumming" is an exhibit of drawings, models, and related material that illustrates the development of the city's newest work of public art - *The Lowell Sculptures: One, Two, and Three* by Robert Cumming.

The artist made the first of his many visits to Lowell in October, 1988, to begin the research that led to his proposal to create a sculpture for the city. Working at home in Connecticut or at his studio in western Massachusetts, he refined his ideas. A model was presented to the sponsors of the project and approved in the summer of 1989. The drawings in this exhibit show the development of the design up to the point of fabrication, when the pieces of stone were quarried and cut in Chelmsford, Massachusetts, and Barre, Vermont.

The sculptures are installed around the perimeter of Boarding House Park adjacent to the Patrick J. Mogan Cultural Center. They consist of a series of simple forms based on Lowell symbols that have been combined in a modular design.

Describing the design process, the artist said, "I was looking for a series of modular shapes that would represent Lowell and cities of the American Industrial Revolution.

"Using very recognizable elements seemed to make sense in a public project. One of the first shapes that came up was the thread spool, which is similar to a shape I've used in pastwork: a beehive. I rounded off the spool from the mills to make the shape more like a hive, and in so doing it became less a thread spool than a general shape that could be a beehive, an early American symbol for industry.

"The second major piece is the silhouette of Francis Cabot Lowell, which I saw all over the city. I photographed a copy of it at the Pollard Memorial Library. Some of the other shapes came from the stonework around the locks and canals."

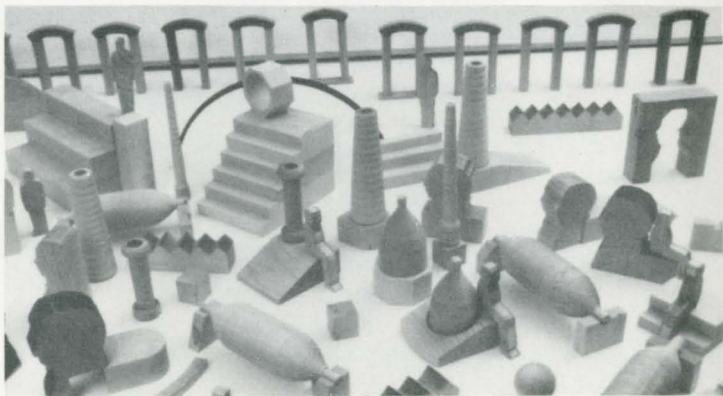
Using these logo-type forms, Cumming created an artwork that invites people to approach it. "It is meant to be used. If you see a set of stairs going up an intricate form, there's an impulse to climb. The three sculptures are of human-scale, and I hope people will sit and stand on them."

## THE SCULPTURES

As a youngster and student, Robert Cumming was fascinated with industrial machinery, inventions, models, and architecture. His early sculptures have been described as "high-school wood shop projects gone awry." The same spirit is evident in the Lowell Sculptures.

After deciding to use the logo building blocks, he began making the components of his model. "In order to play with the module idea and interchange the shapes in a great number of combinations, I made well over 100 pieces. Last winter it was like Santa's Workshop in my living room," he said.

Sculpture One is the centerpiece of the series. The most intricate of the sculptures, this piece includes the six-foot high, six-ton granite silhouette of Francis Cabot Lowell faced on two sides with steel painted black. The elaborate red brick and gray granite base with steps is reminiscent of the stair wall at



the Guard Locks on the upper Pawtucket Canal. The third element is the notched granite thread spool or beehive form.

The elements of this sculpture suggest basic building blocks of the city: the mind of Mr. Lowell; the built environment; and the product of industry. The structure offers a kind of observation deck made of "Lowell material" from which to view the heart of the industrial city.

This is the most visible of the three sculptures because of its size and location close to the Mogan Cultural Center. Placed at three points in the park, the sculptures are like signposts that fit into the landscape as neatly as the components of each sculpture interlock.

Francis Cabot Lowell, born in 1774, was the son of Judge John Lowell of Boston. He attended Harvard College, graduating in 1793, and became a successful businessman in the field of international commerce. In 1811 he traveled to Great Britain, where he observed the textile industry in action. He is credited with memorizing English mechanical designs, which he then recreated back home.

In 1815, the power loom that he and Paul Moody built was the key component of the Boston Manufacturing Company's mill in Waltham, MA - the first completely integrated cotton manufacturing operation in America. Lowell died two years later. In 1821, needing more waterpower to expand their factory, the owners of the company visited the Pawtucket Falls on the Merrimack River in what was then East Chelmsford. On the banks of the river they developed a new mill town and gave it the name Lowell in 1826.

*On returning to his country, he (Lowell) had locked himself into a loft on Broad Street in Boston, and set himself the laborious task, with the help of a mechanic, of reconstructing a power loom. When it was finally done, he invited Nathan Appleton to inspect it. Appleton was duly impressed:*

*I well recollect the state of admiration and satisfaction with which we sat by the hours watching the beautiful movement of this new and wonderful machine, destined, as it evidently was, to change the character of all textile industry.*

**Joseph W. Lipchitz, "The Golden Age" in Cotton Was King (1976)**

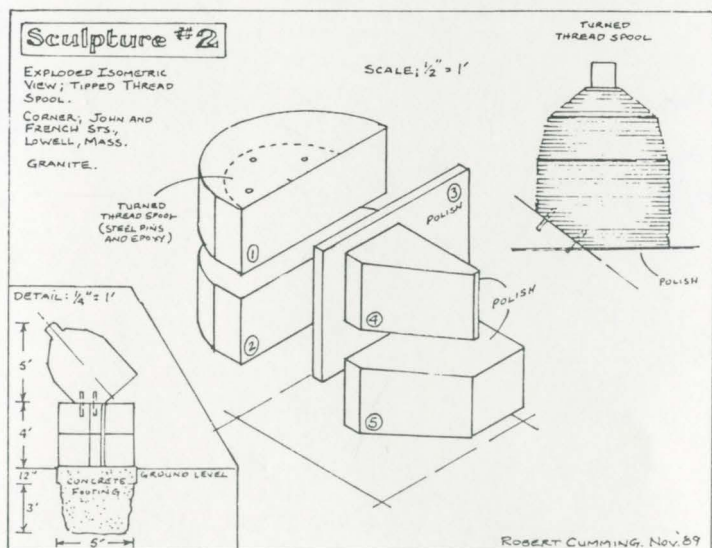


Sculpture Two is the tipped thread spool or hive shape mounted on a granite base near the corner of French and John Streets. This sculpture had to be positioned carefully, considering the large transformer box in that area of the park. The box now seems to be part of the overall composition.

Although originally conceived as a spool tilted on a low slab for seating, the final design called for a four-foot high pedestal to support the spool, making a more dramatic focal point at that corner. The tip of the spindle is about nine feet high. Long steel pins anchor the top section. The sculpture includes a section of black granite polished to a mirror finish. The odd angle of the spool gives this sculpture a sense of both whimsy and tension.

*I listen, awake, for the city's hum,  
A faint little threadlet of far-off sound,  
Growing ever-confused, like a skein unwound  
By headless fingers, wherein I hear  
The voices of myriad work-folk dear,  
Who make earth the sheltering home that it is,  
With their beautiful manifold industries.*

Lucy Larcom, *The Lowell Offering* (1841)



The zigzag horizontal piece in Sculpture Three can be read as a factory roof line, worker housing, gears, or even a picket fence. The saw-toothed or pinking sheared edge design is a common folk art motif that Cumming has often used on the frames of his paintings.

The ten-foot high spindle or smokestack shape and long, low saw-toothed form are dark gray granite. Set in the corner of the park nearest the entrance to The Boott Mills (with its great red brick smokestack), this piece is not as immediately visible as the other sculptures. It is angled in around a tree pit

close to the performance pavilion.

"I tried to make the sculptures compatible with their surroundings. Because of that some of the materials are the same: granite and red brick. I didn't want to shout aesthetic individuality," said the artist.

The sculptures need not be encountered in any special order. Cumming's work charms, surprises, and offers the viewer satisfying moments of recognition as he or she reads and then relates the forms to the surrounding city.

*...the factories at Lowell produce a greater quantity of yarn and cloth from each spindle and loom (in a given time) than is produced in any other factory...in the world....*

**James Montgomery**, *Practical Detail of the Cotton Manufacture of the United States Contrasted and Compared with that of Great Britain*, (1840)

*O tall red chimneys of the Cotton Mills of Lowell,  
tall redbrick goof of Boott, swaying in the terminus  
clouds of the wild hoorah day and dreambell afternoon -*

**Jack Kerouac**, *Doctor Sax*, (1959)

## THE LOWELL PUBLIC ART COLLECTION

Robert Cumming's sculptures are the most recent additions to the Lowell Public Art Collection, a series of contemporary works of art along Lowell's canals and in the downtown historic district. Artists represented in the collection created works that address issues arising from the themes of Lowell National and State Parks: The Industrial City, Labor, Machines, Power, and Capital.

Public art in the form of statues and memorials has long been part of the culture of American cities. A more recent development is the installation of large sculptures and other types of art on plazas, in subway stations, and in other private or public spaces. Artists are now collaborating with architects and engineers in the design of buildings, parks, and bridges.

In Lowell, the whole city is seen as a museum - its people and structures comprising a rich cultural environment. The works of public art are visual commentaries on Lowell's past and present.

Former United States Senator and Lowell resident Paul Tsongas has led the efforts to build the public art collection since 1981. The collection includes *Homage to Women* by Mico Kaufman (1984), *The Worker* by Ivan and Elliot Schwartz (1985), *The Big Wheel* (1986), *Pawtucket Prism* by Michio Ihara (1987), *The Jack Kerouac Commemorative* by Ben Woitena (1988), and *Human Construction* by Carlos Dorrien (1989). Works by Dimitri Hadzi, Suzanne Hellmuth and Jock Reynolds, and David Ireland will be completed in the near future.

The Lowell Public Art Collection is recognized as one of the most outstanding public art projects in the country and will be the focus of a national conference in Lowell in the fall of 1991.

## ABOUT THE ARTIST

Robert Cumming was born in Worcester, MA, in 1943. A versatile artist, Cumming is equally adept as a sculptor, painter, photographer, draftsman, printmaker, and writer. Among his honors and awards are fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Guggenheim Foundation and the Creative Arts Award of Brandeis University.

In 1984, he was one of ten artists invited to document the Olympic Games in Los Angeles. His most recent public art project was a structure designed for a park in Pittsburgh as part of the Three Rivers Festival. His works are included in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Whitney Museum, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Hirshhorn Museum, and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.

Interviewed in Lowell, the artist offered this brief sketch of his career to date:

"I graduated as a painter from Mass. College of Art in the mid-60's and went to graduate school. My emergence as an artist was in the Milwaukee area. I was dissatisfied with painting and became a sculptor and started making things.

"Through the late 60's and early 70's, I began getting more and more involved in the photographic presentation of these sculptures. I had evolved a way of presenting photographs of the sculptures rather than the sculptures themselves. The conceptual art movement was really moving during that period. During the 70's I was established as a figure in conceptual-type photography.

"Around 1977 I began to drift back toward making handmade pictures - ink drawings and large charcoal drawings. From 1980 to the present I've been making the images larger and changing the medium. So I've become a painter again, although I still do sculpture and photography."





Robert Cumming was commissioned to create *The Lowell Sculptures: One, Two, and Three* with funds from Shawmut Arlington Trust Company, the Lowell Historic Preservation Commission, and the National Endowment for the Arts. The project was coordinated by the Lowell Office of Cultural Affairs in conjunction with the Lowell Historic Preservation Commission.

Special thanks are due to Page One Productions for granting permission to use excerpts from an interview with Robert Cumming.

The photographs and artwork are by Robert Cumming.

The brochure text is by Paul Marion.

## CITY OF LOWELL, MASS.

SITE; BOARDING HOUSE PARK AT

FRENCH ST. AND MOGAN CULTURAL CENTER

ARTIST: ROBERT CUMMING (PLAN; 12/89.)

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## THE PATRICK J. MOGAN CULTURAL CENTER

The mission of the Patrick J. Mogan Cultural Center is to "tell the human story found in the history of the United States as an industrial nation, especially by concentrating on the lives of the working people of Lowell, Massachusetts."

The Center, which opened in 1989, is named in honor of Lowell's former Superintendent of Schools who developed the concept of an urban park focused on Lowell's unique heritage. This former boarding house which housed Boott Mill employees from about 1837 was rehabilitated by the Lowell Historic Preservation Commission, an agency of the U.S. Department of the Interior. It is an appropriate setting for the Lowell National Historical Park's interpretive exhibits on the theme of the Working People: Mill Girls, Immigrants, and Labor. The Center also houses the University of Lowell Center for Lowell History and the University's Downtown Center for Continuing Education which offers year-round classes. A wide variety of cultural programs is also offered throughout the year at the Center.

## TEMPORARY EXHIBITS

Any organization, group, or individual interested in developing a temporary exhibit at the Patrick J. Mogan Cultural Center should contact the Lowell Historic Preservation Commission, Old City Hall, 222 Merrimack Street, Suite 310, Lowell, Massachusetts, 01852, (508) 458-7653. A member of the Community Exhibits Committee will then contact you, and if approved, will recommend your proposal to the Mogan Community Advisory Board.

